



Egypt: Daily Life

Ancient Egypt was a narrow strip of land along the Nile River. Each year the river flooded its banks, leaving behind a fertile fringe of soil they called "the Black Land," while the desert all around the Nile valley was called "the Red Land." It was here the Ancient Egyptians built their homes.

Family Life

The people of ancient Egypt highly valued family life. They treasured children and regarded them as a great blessing. In the lower class families, the mother raised the children. The wealthy and nobility, had slaves and servants that helped take care of the children by attending to their daily needs. If a couple had no children, they would pray to the gods and goddesses for help. They would also place letters at the tombs of dead relatives asking them to use their influence with the gods. Magic was also used as an attempt to have children. In event that a couple still could not conceive a child, adoption was also an option.

Although women were expected to obey their fathers and husbands, they were equal to men in many ways. They had the legal right to participate in business deals, own land, and were expected to represent themselves in court cases. Women even faced the same penalties as men. Sometimes wives and mothers of pharaohs were the "real" ruling power in government, though they ruled unknowingly to common people. Queen Hatshepsut was the only woman who ruled out right by declaring herself pharaoh. An Egyptian wife and mother were highly respected in this ancient society.

Young boys learned a trade or craft from their fathers or an artisan. Young girls worked and received their training at home with their mothers. Those who could afford it sent their sons, from about the age 7, to school to study religion, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Even though there is no evidence of schools for girls, some were home taught to read and write and some even became doctors.

Children were expected to look after their elderly parents. Upon their parents' death, the sons inherited the land, while daughters inherited the household goods such as furniture and jewelry. If there were no sons in the family, there was nothing preventing the daughters from inheriting the land. There is evidence of some women inheriting entire nomos.

Although women were expected to raise the children and take care of the household duties, there were some jobs available to them. Women ran farms and businesses in the absence of their husbands or sons. Women were employed in courts and temples as acrobats, dancers, singers and musicians. Wealthy families hired maids or nannies to help with household chores and the raising of the children. Noblewomen could become a priestess. Women also worked as professional mourners and perfume makers.

Marriage

Peasant girls usually married around the age 12, the boys were a few years older than the girls. Girls of more affluent families married a few years older. The marriages were arranged by parents of the children although some young people chose their own spouse. While the ordinary man normally had one wife, the kings always had several. Before the marriage ceremony, an agreement was signed by the couple. The pre-nuptial agreement stated that the wife was to receive an allowance from her husband. The contract also stated that any material good the wife brought into the marriage was hers to keep if the marriage ended for any reason. Both could own land separate from each other but the wife usually let her husband administer her land along with his.

Divorce was an option, although it was not common. If a husband treated his wife badly, she would go to her family for help. The wife's family would try to persuade her spouse to change his behavior. If his behavior did not improve the divorce took place. The divorce was a simple procedure consisting of making a simple statement to annul the marriage in front of witnesses. The wife was given custody of the children and was free to remarry.

Food and Cooking

Cooking was done in clay ovens as well as over open fires. Wood was used for fuel, even though it was scarce. Food was baked, boiled, stewed, fried, grilled, or roasted. What is known about kitchen utensils and equipment is from the items that have been found in the tombs. Storage jars, bowls, pots, pans, ladles, sieves, and whisks were all used in the preparation of food. Most of the commoners used dishes that were made of clay, while the wealthy used dishes made of bronze, silver, and gold.

Beer was the most popular beverage, and bread was the staple food in the Egyptian diet. The beer was made with barley. The barley was left to dry, and then baked into loaves of bread. The baked barley loaves were then broken into pieces and mixed with the dried grain in a large jug of water and left to ferment. Wine was a drink that was produced by the Egyptians, however, it was usually found only at the tables of the wealthy. To make the bread, women ground wheat into flour. The flour was then pounded by men to make a fine grain. Sesame seeds, honey, fruit, butter, and herbs were often added to the dough to help flavor the bread.

Cosmetics

Cleansing rituals were very important to the Egyptians. Most people bathed daily in the river or out of a water basin at home. The wealthy had a separate room in their home to bath. Servants would pour jugs of water over their master (the equivalent of a modern day shower). The runoff water drained away through a pipe that led to the garden. Instead of washing with soap, a cleansing cream was used. This cream was made from oil, lime, and perfume.

People rubbed themselves daily with perfumed oil. Perfume was made from flowers and scented wood mixed with oil or fat, and was left in a pot until the oil had absorbed the scent. The perfumed oil was used to prevent the skin from drying out in the harsh climate. At parties, servants put cones of perfumed grease on the heads of the guests. As the grease melted, it ran down their face with a pleasing cooling effect.

Men, women and children of all ages and classes wore makeup. Mirrors of highly polished silver or copper were used to aid with the application of makeup. Eye paint was made from green malachite, and galena -- a gray lead ore. They were ground into a powder and mixed with oil to make eye color called Kohl. The Kohl was kept in jars and applied to the eyes with a small stick. The upper and lower eyelids were painted with the black cosmetic that extended in a line out to the sides of the face. It was believed the makeup had magical and even healing powers. Some even believed that wearing it would restore poor eyesight. It was also used to fight eye infections and reduce the glare of the sun.

Other cosmetics used included colors for the lips, cheeks and nails. A type of clay called red ochre was ground and mixed with water, and applied to the lips and cheeks. Henna was used to dye the fingernails yellow and orange. Makeup was stored in special jars and the jars were stored in special makeup boxes. Women would carry their makeup boxes with them to parties and keep them under their chairs.

Hair

Hair styles were very similar to that of todays. The common folk wore their hair short. Young girls usually kept their hair in pigtales while boys had shaved heads, except for one braided lock worn to one side. Wigs were worn by both men and women. The wigs were made of sheep's wool or human hair for decoration and for protection from the heat. Wigs were usually worn at parties and official functions. Hair pieces were also added to real hair to enhance it. When not in use, wigs were stored in special boxes on a stand inside the home.

Jewelry

Everyone in Egypt wore some type of jewelry. Rings and amulets were especially worn to ward off the evil spirits and injury. Both men and women wore pierced earrings, armlets, bracelets, and anklets. The rich wore jeweled or beaded collars, called a wesekh, necklaces, and pendants. For the rich, jewelry was made of gold, silver, or electrum (gold mixed with silver) and inlaid with semi-precious stones of turquoise, lapis lazuli (a deep blue stone), and carnelian (a copper or reddish orange stone). The poorer people wore jewelry that was made of copper or faience (made by heating powdered quartz).

Clothing

Egyptian clothing styles did not change much throughout ancient times. Clothes were usually made of linens ranging from coarse to fine texture. During the Old and Middle kingdoms, men usually wore a short skirt called a kilt. Women wore a straight fitting dress held up by straps. The wealthy men wore pleated kilts, and the older men wore a longer kilt. When doing hard work, men wore a loin cloth, and women wore a short skirt. Children usually ran around nude during the summer months, while in the winter, wraps and cloaks were worn. Noblewomen sometimes wore beaded dresses.

During the New Kingdom, noblemen would sometimes wear a long robe over his kilt, while the women wore long pleated dresses with a shawl. Some kings and queens wore decorative ceremonial clothing with feathers and sequins. Most people went barefoot, but wore sandals on special occasions. The king wore very elaborately decorated sandals, and sometimes decorative gloves on his hands. Clothing styles were chosen for comfort in the hot, dry climate of Egypt.

Housing and Furniture

Egyptian homes were made from bricks of sun dried mud, called adobe, because wood was scarce. A nobleman's home was divided into three areas: a reception area, a hall, and the private quarters. The windows and doors on the house were covered with mats to keep out the flies, dust, and heat. The inside walls were decorated with wall hangings made of leather, and the floors were covered with tile. Sometimes there was a room on the roof with three walls where the family slept on hot summer nights.

The commoners lived in town houses usually two to three stories high. The first story of the town home was usually reserved for businesses, while the second and third floors provided the family living space. Many people slept on the roof during the summer to keep cool. Sewage had to be disposed of by each household in pits, in the river, or in the streets. Most all people had some furniture consisting mostly of a stool, small boxes for jewelry and cosmetics, chests for clothing, pottery jars, and oil lamps. Each home was equipped with at least one fly catcher.

Entertainment

Egyptians spent their spare time doing a wide variety of things, and many of these activities are shown on the tomb walls. Dramatizations were held in the temples, but the most important source of entertainment & relaxation was the Nile river. Activities on the river include fishing, river boat outings, swimming, hunting crocodiles and hippopotamuses, and boat games where two teams of men in boats with long poles, would try to push each other into the water. Hunting in the desert was another great pastime, especially for the noblemen. Men first hunted on foot, however, by the time of the New Kingdom, men used horses and chariots.

Some of the animals the Ancient Egyptians hunted include the fox, hare, and hyena.

Wealthy Egyptians often entertained by holding extravagant parties with plenty of food to eat and beer and wine to drink. Singers, dancers, acrobats, and musicians were hired to entertain. The Egyptians loved music, and played instruments such as the lute, harp, and lyre. Other favorite pastimes included board games like Hounds & Jackals, and Senet. Children kept themselves entertained with toys like carved ivory animals, wooden horses on wheels, and balls.

Festivals held in Ancient Egypt were usually holidays in honor of the gods. The important gods had festivals in their honor that were held by the priests. A statue of the god was carried through the streets.

More friendly gods had celebrations held by the people, and not the priests. Bes is one of the gods the people held a festival for. On the day of Bes, no work was done on the pyramid, and people would parade down the street dressed in masks of Bes, while dancers and tambourine players followed. The townspeople joined in the singing from their rooftops, while the children would run along beside the dancers singing and clapping their hands. The whole town enjoyed the festival and feast.

Government

In the pre-civilization time, people found living in the Nile River Valley provided them a safe environment. The Nile River Valley was a rich area because of the annual flooding of the river. Over time the various groups organized themselves into two separate governments called the Upper

Kingdom and the Lower Kingdom. About 3100 BC., Menes, the ruler of Upper Egypt, conquered the Lower Egyptian Kingdom. Menes united and became the first ruler of both Upper and Lower Egypt.

Where the two kingdoms met, Menes built the capital of Memphis.

To the people of Egypt, the ruler, later called pharaoh, was more than a king. He was considered by many to be a god. As a god, pharaoh was believed to possess the secrets of heaven and earth. The pharaoh was a living embodiment of the Egyptian Gods, and this is why his power was considered absolute by the Egyptians. The pharaoh was responsible for all aspects of Egyptian life -- keeping the irrigation works in order, directing the army, keeping peace, and issuing laws. He also controlled trade and the economy. The base of the pharaoh's power was his control of the land. The pharaoh owned Egypt's mines and quarries and the trading fleets that sailed to foreign lands. Foreign merchants had to deal with royal officials, not with the merchants of Egypt.

Many officials were appointed to supervise the details of the government. The most important was the vizier, also known as the Chief Overseer (he was like a Prime Minister). His job was to carry out the orders and decisions of the pharaoh, and he acted as a diplomat in the royal court, was in charge of tax collection and public works.

Under the vizier were the governors who controlled the local nomes into which Egypt was divided. Beneath the governors were the scribes and overseers. The scribes were the keepers of the records. The overseers supervised the farming of the land, and the peasants. Government and religion were inseparable in Egypt.

Source: Splendors of Ancient Egypt Educational Guide

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